Solzhenitsyn: The Price of Blacklisting a Nobel Laureate's Book

By Adeyinka Makinde



Alexasandr Solzhenitsyn

The Nobel Prize has been described as the highest honour awardable among humankind. Spanning the gamut of the highest levels of endeavour achievable in the sciences and the humanities, a Nobel laureate may thus tend to be viewed as a repository of wisdom, innovation and revelation; and, for many who have won the category in literature, as one who is adept at articulating the human condition in its myriad psychological and cultural manifestations.

In constructing and elaborating on the dramas of life, they can provide avenues of perspective and of understanding which transcend geographic boundaries and enable us to meditate anew and challenge our conceptions, our prejudices and our ability to empathatise.

For those laureates who have had first-hand involvement in the struggle against dictatorship and borne the sting of persecution such as Nigeria's Wole Soyinka, their pronouncements and analyses carry great moral weight that is added to the acknowledged power of their intellect.

These elements of intellectual capacity and the struggle against despotism do not resonate any stronger than the life and works of the late Russian writer, Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn.

A victim of the Gulag system to which he was sentenced in 1945 for criticising Stalin in a private letter to a friend, he was in 1970 awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature based on what the judging panel announced as the "ethical force with which he has pursued the indispensable traditions of Russian literature."

With their vivid depictions of the conditions within the Soviet work camp network and an adroit synthesizing of philosophical, historical and personal components, Solzhenitsyn's *One Day In The Life Of Ivan Denisovich* and *The Gulag Archipelago*, served as unparalleled indictments of the totalitarian system that ultimately developed out of the Marxist-Leninist idea of what was supposed to be the creation of a socialist paradise on earth.

The collapse of the communist experiment in the old Soviet state as well as its displacement as a form of governance in Eastern Europe and many other regions of the earth may arguably have consigned it to the ash heap of history, but it nonetheless remains a contentious area in the consideration of the recent past.

As an arena laden with perspectives which may be predicated on philosophical stances, political agendas, cultural heritage, or even racial and national affinities, history is not an objective science and has often become something of a battleground.

This has proved to be the case so far as the legacy of communism is concerned. Several books have been written such as *Comrades* by Robert Service, the eminent Oxford University historian, which excoriate the Marxist-Leninist model for an inexorable tendency toward despotism and individual coercion, while other works such as Howard Zinn's *Marx In Soho* have attempted to humanize Karl Marx the man as well as to validate his original theories.

Solzhenitsyn in the twilight of his life moved from his lifelong theme of exposing the excesses of Stalinism to that of a subject which has for long been considered as taboo; namely that of the Jewish role in bringing Bolshevism to power and enabling its sustenance.

His two-volume work published in 2001 and 2002, *Two Hundred Years Together*, explored the relations between Jews and Russians dating from the time when the Russian Empire acquired a substantial Jewish population after the partial annexation of Poland in 1772 up to the Refusenik-era and Jewish emigration to Israel.

Part one, *Russian Jewish History: 1795-1916*, is a largely uncontroversial historical document in which Solzhenitsyn acknowledges the specific hardships faced by Jewish communities but that in general, their lives were no harder than that of the Russian peasant, while the second part, *The Jews in the Soviet Union*, inevitably touches upon the role of Jews in the Bolshevik Revolution and in the subsequent Soviet purges.

The sensitivity associated with the topic is perhaps encapsulated in the words of Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, the Russian-Jewish writer and creator of Zionist New Revisionism, who once said that "the best service our Russian friends give to us is never to speak aloud about us."

There were those whose suspicions were aroused by Solzhenitsyn's immersion in such a project given his reputation as a Russian nationalist and a pan-Slavic stance which went as far as suggesting that Russia excise the non-Slavic areas from its territory and amalgamate with Ukraine, Belarus and parts of 'Russified' Kazakhstan.

It was alleged that his patriotism extended into naked chauvinism.

His sojourn in the West which began in 1974 when he was stripped of his Soviet citizenship and deported had revealed him to be a man who was instinctively deeply conservative and even reactionary in his views.

"This is a mistake, but even geniuses make mistakes," opined Yevgeny Satanovsky, the president of the Russian Jewish Congress. "Richard Wagner did not like the Jews, but was a great composer. Dostoyevsky was a great Russian writer, but had a very sceptical attitude towards the Jews.

The book was published in Russia amid fears that it would electrify anti-Semitic sentiment and present an opportunity to calumniate the Jews. It

became a bestseller there, but in the more than a decade which has elapsed since then no English language translation materialised.

The reluctance of the publishing industry to put into print a substantive work created by the winner of a Nobel Prize is a development that warrants close scrutiny.

The description given by the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* which interviewed the writer at the time of the release of both volumes was that they had "provoked mainly perplexity" in the West:

Are we to conclude from your rich array of sources that the Jews carry more responsibility than others for the failed Soviet experiment?

Solzhenitsyn, who died in 2008, replied as follows:

I avoid exactly that which your question implies: I do not call for any sort of scorekeeping or comparisons between the moral responsibility of one people or another; moreover, I completely exclude the notion of responsibility of one nation to another. All I am calling for is self-reflection. You can get the answer to your question from the book itself: Every people must answer morally for all of its past - including that past which is shameful. Answer by what means? Where in all this did we go wrong? And could it happen again? It is in that spirit, specifically, that it would behove the Jewish people to answer, both for the revolutionary cutthroats and the ranks willing to serve them. Not to answer before other peoples, but to oneself, to one's conscience, and before God. Just as we Russians must answer-for the pogroms, for those merciless arsonist peasants, for those crazed revolutionary soldiers, for those savage sailors.

It is indisputably the case that a great many of the leaders of the Bolshevik revolution and of the early Soviet state were of Jewish origin. This was not an altogether surprising development given, in the words of Robert Service, that "Jews supplied leaders and activists to revolutionary parties in the Russian empire wildly out of proportion to their size in the population."

Such preponderance is evidenced by key personages such as Leon Trotsky, the founder and leader of the Red Army; Yakov Sverdlov, the chairman of the Central Executive Committee; Grigori Zinoviev, who headed the Communist International; Karl Radek who was commissar for the press; and Maxim Litvinov who was the foreign affairs commissar. Other key apparatchiks were Lev Kamanev and Mosei Uritsky.

Jews formed sizeable proportions in the Council of Peoples Commissars (or Sovnarkom in its Russian acronym), the diplomatic corps, trade missions and,

controversially, as key administrators within both the state security apparatus including the Cheka and the labour camp network.

Given the necessary depictions of persons of Jewish origin acting as hangmen and not victims, and also as slave drivers and not the ill-treated, these latter features have the capacity to be particularly incendiary; yet, in a lengthy tome published in 2004 and entitled *The Jewish Century*, the Jewish scholar Yuri Slezkine admits that Jews were Stalin's "willing executioners".

And in 2006 Seve Plonker, an Israeli writer, published an article on Ynet News beseeching his readers not to forget that some of the greatest murderers of modern times were Jewish. Entitled 'Stalin's Jews', he specifically referred to Genrikh Yagoda, the founder of the NKVD, as having been "the greatest Jewish murderer of the 20th Century."

It was Yagoda, Plonker reminded, who "diligently implemented Stalin's collectivisation orders and is responsible for the deaths of at least 10 million people."

Many of the deputies who managed the Gulag system were ethnic Jews and their overrepresentation in membership of various incarnations of the secret police meant that during the 1930s, the NKVD was "one of the most Jewish of all Soviet institutions."

As the historian Leonard Shapiro once commented, "Anyone who had the misfortune to fall into the hands of the Cheka stood a very good chance of finding himself confronted with and possibly shot by a Jewish investigator."

Plonker, whose piece contained the allegation that "many Jews sold their soul to the devil of the communist revolution and have blood on their hands for eternity" concluded thus:

"Even if we deny it, we cannot escape the Jewishness of 'our hangmen,' who served the Red terror with loyalty and dedication from its establishment. After all, others will always remind us of their origin."

Speaking at the time of the release of Solzhenitsyn's book, Robert Service candidly told a journalist for the British *Guardian* newspaper that it was an issue which could not be tackled "without a huge amount of bravery," and that as the matter was often the preserve of those whom he described as "fanatics", Solzhenitsyn's efforts were welcomed since his book appeared to be more measured.

It is arguably this general unwillingness of mainstream historians to tackle this issue which has invited others with ill-intentioned motives to fill the vacuum.

The blatant ignoring of Solzhenitsyn's work which may have the tendency to be viewed as a form of suppression or, at least, as self-censorship has effectively provided an avenue for those describing themselves as 'White nationalists' and those on the extreme political Right to refer to this as an example of what they would claim to be the abject surrender to Jewish sensitivities and an affirmation of the 'control' wielded by Jewish interests in the cultural and media outlets of the Western world.

The narrative emanating from these schools of thought often posit the thesis that the Bolshevik Revolution was in essence an upheaval promulgated by ethnic Jews primarily for their own benefit and largely at the expense of ethnic Russians and other Slavs whom they despised for the persecutions they had continually suffered including the murderous rampages known as pogroms.

The establishment of the Soviet state and its instruments of coercion as well as the pursuance of harsh social and economic remedies such as the suppression of the Orthodox Christian Church and policy of enforced collectivisation represented, in this line of thinking, a ferocious attack on the heart and soul of Russia by an alien and alienated people.

Thus the eternal theme of Jews as relentless conspirators and tribal-networkers seeking to dominate a society where they form a 'hostile elite' has, in the near century which has elapsed since the revolution, been repeatedly constructed.

However, the explanation of a 'Jewish conspiracy' behind the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia followed by a strategy to export it to the rest of Europe and the world was not one which was first articulated by Adolf Hitler in all his demonic fury, but was in fact put forward by Hitler's future nemesis Winston Churchill.

In an often referenced article in a 1920 edition of the *Illustrated Sunday Herald* entitled 'Zionism Versus Bolshevism: A Struggle For The Soul Of The Jewish People', Churchill expressed astonishment at the accomplishment of this "mystic and mysterious race" whom he claimed "have gripped the

Russian people by the hair of their heads and have become practically the undisputed masters of that enormous empire."

In connection with what he termed a "sinister confederacy of international Jews", Churchill had mentioned the leaders of national communist parties such as Rosa Luxembourg in Germany, Bela Kun in Hungary and Emma Goldman in the United States as part of the tentacles of what he grandiosely branded a "worldwide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilization and for the reconstitution of society on the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence and impossible equality."

Such conspiracy, it continues to be argued by the contrarian Right and advocates of White nationalism, was manifestly and predictably tribal in terms of its transcending of both religious and political leanings as well as national boundaries.

In other words, the fact that the Jews as atheistic communists had cast off the formalities of religious observance did not preclude them from continuing to adhere to a Jewish identity and to co-operate with those who were ethnic Jews.

It also meant that they allegedly accepted funds from capitalists such as Jacob Schiff, the senior partner in the New York-based firm of international bankers Kuhn, Loeb and Company; this the figure who had ensured that Japan had access to financial credits which it utilised in building up the naval force which defeated the Tsar's navy in 1905.

And the fact that Trotsky was an apostate Jew and others who rose to prominence continued to receive entries into publications such as the *Encyclopedia Judaica* and plentiful coverage in Jewish-orientated newspapers suggested an expression of racial pride and ethnic solidarity that confirmed to those on the Right the accuracy of their thesis.

Certainly, the opinion expressed in an edition of the periodical *American Hebrew* in September 1920 that the "Russian Jewish Revolution was largely the outcome of Jewish thinking, of Jewish discontent, of Jewish effort to reconstruct", has been often quoted as evidence of this.

The unavailability of Solzhenitsyn's work in the English language has meant that the limited translations available have been facilitated by White nationalists who, largely disinterested in the first volume, have unsurprisingly

focussed on the second where they are keen to give emphasis to those passages which can be projected in a manner to fit in with their views.

The *Occidental Observer* ran a series of articles by Kevin MacDonald, a psychology professor at California State University, who summarised what in his estimation were the main points of chapters available in English in which he then made analogies regarding his perception of the contemporary role of organised Jewry in the Western world.

MacDonald is the purveyor of a concept he terms 'evolutionary group strategy' within which context his works have focused on his thesis of Judaism and its culture as having presented the means and mechanism through which Jews as a highly ethnocentric, cohesive and aggressive group have consistently risen to the elite of the societies in which they have resided.

Thus the part played by Jewish figures in the Bolshevik revolution and the exercise of Jewish power form a well established pattern which in the 20th century saw their rise not only in the former Russian Empire, but also in the Middle East and in the United States.

MacDonald therefore extracted those portions of Solzhenitsyn's narrative which confirm Jewish domination of the Soviet government in the first decade of its existence as well as the resulting anti-Semitism.

So for instance a person identified as a "Jewish observer" in 1923 states the following:

The Jew is in all corners and on all levels of power...The Russian sees him as a ruler of Moscow, at the head of the capital on Neva (Leningrad), and at the head of the Red Army, a perfected death machine. He sees that St. Vladimir Prospect has been renamed Naumson Prospect...The Russian sees the Jew as judge and hangman; he sees Jews at every turn, not only among the communists, but among people like himself, everywhere doing the bidding of Soviet power...Not surprisingly, the Russian, comparing present with past, is confirmed in his idea that power is Jewish power, that it exists for Jews and does the bidding of Jews.

In another excerpt ruminating on perceived Jewish privilege and influence, the translation has Solzhenitsyn citing a Jewish writer named Maslov as saying the following:

The expression 'Kike Power' is often used in Russia and particularly in Ukraine and in the former Pale of Settlement not as a polemic, but as a completely objective definition of power, its content and its politics.

Maslov adds:

Soviet power in the first place answers the wishes and interests of Jews and they are its ardent supporters and in the second place, power resides in Jewish hands.

Solzhenitsyn apparently did not subscribe to the claim that Jews who had prominent roles in the Bolshevist state had shorn off their Jewish identity and assumed an assimilated one within the context of the new Soviet culture.

Maslov is again quoted by Solzhenitsyn in the chapter dealing with the Gulag in which Jewish success in institutions is based on their networking which ensured that they were favoured when selecting staff.

This theme is repeated so far as the implementation of the New Economic Policy in the early 1920s under which limited forms of capitalist endeavour were allowed. Solzhenitsyn records that the anger against Jewish success arose from the perception that "their commerce was routinely facilitated by their links and pulls in the Soviet apparatus."

The extrapolations MacDonald makes from reviewing not only the work of Solzhenitsyn but also Slezkine's *The Jewish Century* is predicated on references to Jews as a minority always having to form alliances to maintain their power, including their representation within and 'colonisation' of the institutions of academia and the media as well as their influence on culture and the nature of laws created by the legislature.

Thus, in regard to the last issue, the Bolshevik criminalisation of anti-Semitism as "anti-revolutionary" activity is seen as an extreme form of contemporary 'political correctness'.

Another avowed White nationalist who is attempting to make capital out of the absence of Solzhenitsyn's work is David Duke who has recently published a book entitled *The Secret Behind Communism*.

Duke, who claims to have relied extensively on Solzhenitsyn's work, has high hopes that his book will serve to be a 'game changer' of sorts. His book introduction contains a quote which he attributes to Solzhenitsyn on the occasion of a meeting he had with the Nobel laureate in 2002.

"You must understand the leading Bolsheviks who took over Russia were not Russians," Solzhenitsyn is claimed to have told him. "They hated Russians. They hated Christians. Driven by ethnic hatred they tortured and slaughtered

millions of Russians without a shred of human remorse. It cannot be overstated. Bolshevism committed the greatest human slaughter of all time. The fact that the world is ignorant and uncaring about this enormous crime is proof that the global media is in the hands of the perpetrators."

This statement together with references to Seve Plonker's article on 'Stalin's Jews' set the scene for an elaborate thesis which posits the Soviet regime as effectively being the instrument for Jewry's vengeance against the Russian and Ukrainian people.

Duke argues that the deaths of millions of Orthodox Christians at the hands of a 'Jewish-led' government was a crime "unparalleled in history"; and that the Holodomor, during which anything from 5 to 8 million Ukrainians starved to death as part of a state-sponsored policy aimed at diminishing Ukrainian nationalist sentiment, was a tragedy which not only rivals that of the later Shoah but in fact surpasses it.

His idea therefore is to change the nature of the discourse from what he considers to be the defensive posture imposed on others by organised Jewry in regard to the issue of the Holocaust and Jewish accusations of Gentile complicity and inaction into one where Jews are accused of perpetrating mass genocide on another people.

Duke is also keen exploit the role of Lazar Kaganovich, an ethnic Jew, as the key overseer of the Ukrainian policy. Kaganovich, who Simon Sebag Montefiore characterised as having been "unmoved" by the tragedy of his devising, is to Duke surpassed in genocidal culpability by Genrikh Yagoda.

That Yagoda, a man who cultivated a distinct moustache identical to that of Adolf Hitler's, is not known to the wider public as a mass murderer is as telling to Duke as is the lack of public consciousness about the Holodomor.

But the references to Solzhenitsyn's work by those who fall out of the spectrum of contemporary historical orthodoxies by reason of their race-based political and social standpoints should not be taken as evidence of an effort by the Nobel laureate which is sullied by naked anti-Semitism.

Solzhenitsyn's views are more nuanced and his book had motives clearly divergent from those intended by those advocating the White nationalist cause. As he explained to *Der Spiegel*, "My book was directed to empathise with the thoughts, feelings and the psychology of the Jews – their spiritual content."

For instance, while the contrarian view postulates a Jewish conspiracy in the early 20th Century upheavals in Russia, Solzhenitsyn was categorical in his explanation that the Jews were not the orchestrators of the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. And of the latter event he clearly stated that "one layer rushed headfirst to the revolution", while "another, to the contrary, was trying to stand back."

At the end of the ninth chapter, he denounced "the superstitious faith in the historical potency of conspiracies" by which Jews have been attributed responsibility while ignoring "Russian failings that determined our sad historical decline."

Another clear distinction between Solzhenitsyn and those who would claim him is his berating of the 'White Russians', the supporters of the *ancien regime*, for condoning violence directed at Jews in general as opposed to those particular Jews who were combatants in the ensuing civil war.

This factor, he claimed, undermined "what would have been the chief benefit of a White victory" in the Russian Civil War with the Bolsheviks: a victory which would have amounted to "a reasonable evolution of the Russian state."

Yet another key point of distinction between Solzhenitsyn and revisionists such as David Duke is the interpretation given of the Holodomor.
Unlike White nationalists, he does not posit this event as a racial massacre of a Christian people by vengeful atheistic Jews.

While acknowledging it as an exceptional tragedy, he fits it in to the overall context as a Bolshevik-inspired calamity which was the by-product of the ruthless decrees geared towards fulfilling grain procurements.

For Solzhenitsyn the idea of the Holodomor having been a policy of deliberate genocide is in essence an act of revisionism. The Ukrainian tragedy in his view was not different from the Russian famine of 1921.

Where White nationalists cannot misappropriate, distort or otherwise co-opt from Solzhenitsyn to fit into their narrative, some have not failed to criticise him where he has not come up to their standard of revisionism.

For instance, the German revisionist historian Udo Walendy, whose writings have enabled him to run afoul of 'Holocaust denial' legislation, took him to task for falling short when dealing with the German prosecution of the war

and the fate of the Jews in German occupied Europe and those living on the western borders of the Soviet Union.

Solzhenitsyn's "shameful" shortcoming, according to Walendy, was in relying exclusively on articles and reports in *Pravda* and *Izvestia*; which to him equate to "Jewish sources", a number of Russian books and portions of the Nuremberg trials.

Here Solzhenitsyn, perhaps in Walendy's view the Russian patriot with more than a residue of anti-German sentiment, "remains a captain of the Red Army that marched in 1945 into East Prussia."

One issue which Solzhenitsyn's book makes crystal clear, as indeed does that of Yuri Slezkine, is that the narrative which positions Jews as having been perpetual victims under the Soviet system is not a tenable one.

While most Jews were not Bolsheviks at the time of the revolution, evidence does indicate that they broadly benefited in terms of opportunities offered by the Soviet state; a new order in which many became part of or associated with the privileged elite.

But of course, the aggregate power of Jews diminished as the revolution began to devour many figures under the direction of Josef Stalin and also in the aftermath of the Second World War; fought under the banner of the 'Great Patriotic War', which saw the assertion of ethnic Russians and their increased deployment to positions of state power.

A clear phenomenon of a state sponsored campaign against Soviet Jewry occurred during this period when Stalin became convinced that the communist state would have to compete with Zionism for the loyalty of its Jewish citizens.

Thus the history of the Soviet Union is also the history of the waxing and waning of Jewish power. And so far as the malodorous aspects of this history are concerned, they were, as Robert Service explained, "part-victims and part-perpetrators."

Solzhenitsyn was clear that he never made general conclusions about a people, and that he differentiated between layers of Jews.

This is crucial. He had already set out his line of thinking in a 1974 essay which he entitled *Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations* which called for atonement for all ethnic groups in Russia.

Unlike the ploy of White nationalists who assert that Jewish interests held the whole of Germany responsible for the sins of the Nazi state; a guilt which they claim has been inherited by later generations of Germans and a line of reasoning they wish to apply to Jewish involvement in the outrages of Soviet communism, Solzhenitsyn's emphasis is not one of apportioning collective guilt and responsibility or of scapegoating a race, but on acknowledgement as part of a process of atonement.

One of his biographers, DM Thomas, expressed the view that he did not think that he had been motivated by anti-Semitism and doubted that he was insincere in his support for the state of Israel. "In his fiction and factual writing", continued Thomas, "there are Jewish characters that he writes about who are bright, decent, anti-Stalinist people."

By writing a non-fictionalised account of Russian and Soviet history, he was attempting to write while relying solely on scientific analysis. It was alleged that Solzhenitsyn had made several factual errors, and that while he was an expert in the field of literature, he not a trained historian.

But these issues alongside the disputed allegation of anti-Semitism do not form a valid justification for ignoring his work. Solzhenitsyn's literary work, although fictionalised, often contained accurate contexts of history which added to the authenticity of his plot lines.

Publication would enable his researched factual content, his points of analysis as well as his conclusions to be available to the reading public and scholars thus presenting the opportunity for open discussion and debate on this extensive 600-page work by a man once described as "too intelligent, too honest, too courageous and too great a writer" to succumb to rabid anti-Semitism.

As it stands, the deliberate neglect of this work arguably strikes a tremendous blow against the values of freedom often pontificated upon in the Western world.

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